CULTURE

The Nearly Extinct Movie Tradition Filmmakers Should Bring Back

For theatergoers, the all but obsolete musical overture is a bridge between real life and the world they're about to enter.

ADRIANNE BERNHARD · OCTOBER 12, 2018

The interior of Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, CA. (FREDERIC J. BROWN / AFP / GETTY)

The movie overture—music set against a blank screen or still images before the drama unfolds—all but disappeared from film sometime in the 1970s. Once a Hollywood mainstay, overtures evolved naturally from their use in opera and road shows, giving moviegoers time to find their seats and settle in before the main feature. But these musical particles also served an important cinematic function: They allowed audiences a chance to put aside their thoughts of the outside world. With curtains drawn and house lights dimmed, overtures drew moviegoers in, and inward, toward a space of anticipation.

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In a culture that serves interest on eradicating boredom in all its forms, the overture's virtual obsolescence might have as much to do with box-office economics as with a fear of open-endedness. Given no option but to sit and wait, audiences quickly grow restless. But the film overture is in fact a respite from distraction, even as it's an occasion for distractibility. These opening sequences offer the chance to rediscover music as a kind of cinematic storytelling, so think about the ways form dictates content, or so simply reflect. For moviegoers, the overture is a bridge between real life and the story they're about to enter; filmmakers should consider bringing it back.

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In some ways, 2018 marks a noteworthy anniversary for the overture in cinema (though, to date, not a single wide release this year has featured one). It's been half a century since *Funny Girl* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* hit theaters; *Bye Bye Birdie* and *North by Northwest* premiered 60 years ago; *Gone With the Wind* nearly 80. Aside from the cultural significance, each of these films makes deliberate use of a graphic or instrumental prelude that sets the mood or establishes relevant themes—the lush musical score that precedes Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, for example, or the Latin rhythms and pop-jukebox compilations set to bold color palettes in *Wes Anderson Story*. In some cases, the movie's overture has become a showpiece itself.

"Opening sequences guide us into the dynamic and meaningful unfolding of an on-screen narrative," writes Annette Insdorf, in one of the most comprehensive guides on the subject, *Cinematic Overtures: How to Read Opening Scenes*. The title sequence of a movie is often called an overture when it combines visual and musical elements, but the term is sometimes deployed loosely. Some critics argue that overtures allow the story to take shape, that they're a sequence of images and sounds in which "the film reflects on ... the process of its own coming into being." Others maintain that the device is strictly reserved for the raconteurs of Broadway musicals, on the storytelling of highbrow drama—yet these preludes have historically been used to great effect in non-musicals.

From the old French *une ouverture*, meaning an opening, the film overture frequently signifies an introduction to something more substantial, but it can also mean an approach that establishes a relationship. *2001* does both: The wordless first 25 minutes of Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece serve as both narrative prologue and as emissary from director to audience. Here, the sequence is an invitation that rewards active curiosity: Might the featureless screen be a metaphor for the monolith itself? Could the film's pitch-black opening be an allegory for man's place in the vast emptiness of the void? Is the cosmic crescendo of György Ligeti's *Requiem* a stand-in for the universe just before the Big Bang and "the dawn of man"? While it's much easier to ask such questions after the final credits have rolled, overtures prompt inquiry at the outset, urging audiences to climb aboard as voyeurs, skeptics, or simply passengers along for the ride.

What's more certain is that overtures transformed over time, in concert with the changing experience of moviegoing. Newsreels and animated shorts, once a cinema staple, disappeared in the 1960s. To fill that gap (and lure people away from television's increasing popularity), studios devised the roadshow: a prestige release format for big-budget films. Roadshows were longer and more expensive to produce than regular motion-picture screenings, but the viewing experience was singular. These traveling exhibitions featured live orchestras and reserved seating inside lavish theaters. Glittering marquees announced premieres in cities like New York or Los Angeles, where tickets sold well in advance. Since roadshows lasted hours, curtains were closed at each reel change (what we might now call an intermission), giving moviegoers a chance to buy concessions and providing a buffer for latecomers. Projectionists worked hard to get those cues and timings right, and audiences, for their part, understood them: Overtures marked the start of storytelling and spectacle.

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The tradition is all but extinct today. Screenwriters perhaps worry that audiences won't have the patience to sit through six minutes of music. Projectionists curtains seem as quaintly analog as folding maps or rotary phones. And the idea of an interval before the start, or between "acts," of a movie seems fairly impractical, given that previews are a more lucrative use of that time. There's the odd movie that still makes intermissions use of overtures—Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), for example, which features Wagner's prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, or Terrence Malick's haunting prologue in *The New World* (2005)—but most studios today opt for a brief title sequence or a cold open. Even in older films, overtures are frequently cut from TV and video releases, along with the intermission, *entr'acte*, and exit music. And streaming services like Netflix allow, or even encourage, viewers to skip intros of TV episodes with the touch of a button.

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As media consumption has become more solitary and distracted, fewer opportunities exist for immersive or shared cinematic experiences, except possibly as glancing tributes to the past. Like celluloid film or theater ushers, overtures have become curiosities, artifacts of Old Hollywood. To that end, the 50th anniversary of *2001* has sparked a number of screenings and special events, many of which have preserved the original presentation of the movie's overture. Audiences still "watch" opening blackness against a blank screen while listening to Richard Strauss's iconic orchestral music. One theater even brought in a live orchestra.

Whether viewers find the experience of sitting through an overture enriching or tortuous is hard to say. It's likely that many never take the time to wait for it, reaching instead for the tiny screens in their pockets. At a time when cinema etiquette is in decline, the overture might be put to one of its earliest purposes: getting people to behave. During the silent era, instructions to unwrap candy and avoid talking were often shown during the overture, and an updated version of this practice could have more success than AMC's "Don't Ruin the Movie" shtick.

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For theater chains and studio executives, trading consumption for contemplation might seem like a bid for nostalgia at best, and like another nail in the multiplex coffin at worst. Trailers and teasers reliably keep audiences occupied, while the overture requires a kind of patience that's supposed to be its own reward. Yet there are some conceivable advantages: Its return could help filmmakers further distinguish the theater experience from at-home viewing. Since many of cinema's most beloved movies —*Lawrence of Arabia*, Vertigo, *West Side Story*—have overtures, theaters could capitalize on that association to make new features feel like an event. Live music, 70-millimeter projections, wal-battered popcorn, and limited releases could likewise elevate the exhibition experience and justify higher ticket prices.

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Many arthouse theaters already recognize the overture's cinematic heritage and promote it as an important part of the contemporary theatrical experience. "We try to make movie-going special and transportive," says Alison Kasberg, the managing director for Art House Convergence, an association of movie theaters, scholars, and archivists committed to independent cinema. "We complement films with live music, spoken introductions, historic trailers, and ephemera." For Kasberg and others, these gestures connect audiences to the physical space of the theater as well as to the narrative of the film. Whether a meditative prelude or a rousing musical number, overtures ask audiences to entertain the vanishing rituals of cinema—to sit, in a darkened theater, somewhere between realism and adversary.

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